

Perfection, Near-Perfection, Maximality, and Anselmian Theism

Suppose that we take Anselmian Theism to consist in the following two claims: (a) there is a being than which none greater can be conceived; and (b) it is knowable on purely—solely, entirely—*a priori* grounds that there is a being than which none greater can be conceived. A key question in the assessment of Anselmian Theism concerns the interpretation of the expression ‘being than which none greater can be conceived’. In particular, a question that is suggested by some of the recent literature in this topic is whether we should interpret this expression in terms of perfect—*ideal*—excellence, or whether we should interpret it in terms of maximal—*maximal possible*—excellence.

In this paper, I set out to examine the notions of particular excellence, overall excellence, perfect excellence, and maximal excellence. I argue that, when we get clear about these notions, we see that Anselmian Theism gains traction by conflating notions that ought to be carefully distinguished; and we also see that there are grounds for thinking that a careful separation of notions that ought to be distinguished casts serious doubt on claim (b), i.e. on the second of the two claims that is constitutive of Anselmian Theism.

There is also an appendix to my paper, in which I examine the recent defence of Anselmian Theism in Nagasawa (2008). Here, I argue that Nagasawa’s defence of Anselmian Theism is undermined by the conflation identified in the main body of my paper.

1. Excellences and Excellence

We begin our investigation with consideration of the following assumption:

Excellence Assumption: One property of a thing is its overall excellence. The overall excellence of a thing depends upon further properties of that thing: its particular excellences. The overall excellence of a thing is determined by whether or not it possesses—and, at least in some cases, the extent to which it possesses—particular excellences.

The Excellence Assumption is controversial. Some—e.g. non-cognitivists and error-theorists—deny that there are excellences, i.e. they deny that there are properties of things that correspond to some or all of our evaluative terms. Others—even amongst those who accept that there are properties of things that correspond to at least some of our evaluative terms—deny that there is a property of a thing that is its overall excellence. Perhaps there are yet others—even among those who accept that there are properties of things that correspond to at least some of our evaluative terms, and who also accept that the overall excellence of a thing features among the properties of that thing—who deny that the overall excellence of a thing is determined by the particular excellences that are possessed by that thing.

Here, I take no stand on the acceptability of the Excellence Assumption; I am merely interested in exploring possible consequences of its acceptance. However, in the final sections of my paper, I will return to consider some of the implications of the evidently controversial nature of the Excellence Assumption.

2. Orderings

If we suppose that excellences are properties of things, then we can also suppose that it is possible to compare possible objects in respect of their possession of particular excellences. If a particular excellence is an all-or-nothing matter, then that excellence partitions possible objects into two disjoint collections: the possible objects that possess the excellence, and the possible objects that fail to possess the excellence. (We ignore complications that might arise from considerations of vagueness, and the like.) But, if a particular excellence is not an all-or-nothing matter, then there will be at least some pairs of possible objects for which it is true that one of the possible objects in the pair exceeds or surpasses the other possible object in that pair for that particular excellence.

Cases in which a particular excellence e is not an all-or-nothing matter divide into two types. On the one hand, it might be that e imposes a total ordering on possible objects: it might be that, for any pair of possible objects o_1 and o_2 , either (i) o_1 exceeds or surpasses o_2 in respect of e ; or (ii) o_2 exceeds or surpasses o_1 in respect of e ; or (iii) o_1 and o_2 are equal in respect of e . On the other hand, it might be that e merely imposes a partial ordering on possible objects: it might be that there are some pairs of possible objects for which none of (i), (ii) and (iii) is true. If e merely imposes a partial ordering on possible objects, then there are pairs of possible objects that are not ranked in respect of e .

According to the Excellence Assumption, the overall excellence of a possible object is determined by its particular excellences. It seems plausible to think that, if some particular excellences merely impose a partial ordering on possible objects, then overall excellence will also only impose a partial ordering on possible objects. (If necessary, we can stipulate that something counts as an excellence only if it can make a difference to overall excellence. If a particular excellence e that only imposes a partial ordering on possible objects can make a difference to overall excellence, and if possible objects o_1 and o_2 can be equal in overall excellence apart from consideration of e , then o_1 and o_2 can fail to be ranked in respect of overall excellence. More generally, if possible objects o_1 and o_2 can be equal in respect of all particular excellences in which they are ranked, and there can be excellences on which o_1 and o_2 are not ranked, then it seems clear that o_1 and o_2 will not be ranked in respect of overall excellence.) However, even if all excellences are total orderings, it might still be that overall excellence is merely partially ordered: whether or not this is so depends upon the details of the determination of overall excellence by particular excellences.

3. Scales

If a particular excellence e imposes a total ordering on possible objects, then we can suppose that e generates a *scale* for objects. There are various different kinds of scales that might be supposed to apply to particular excellences.

1. A scale for a particular excellence might be discrete, or dense, or continuous.
2. A scale for a particular excellence might be bounded or unbounded.

3. A scale for a particular excellence might have one dimension, or it might have more than one dimension.
4. A scale for a particular excellence might have a finite analysis, or it might fail to have a finite analysis.

If a particular excellence e is an all-or-nothing matter along a given dimension, then we can take the set $\{0, 1\}$ to be an adequate representation of an appropriate scale for e along that dimension.

If a particular excellence e is not an all-or-nothing matter along a given dimension, and if e partitions possible objects into finitely many equivalence classes, then we can take a set $\{0, 1, \dots, N\}$ to be an adequate representation of an appropriate scale for e along that dimension.

If a particular excellence e is not an all-or-nothing matter along a given dimension, and if e partitions possible objects into infinitely many equivalence classes that collectively have the ordinal features of the natural numbers, then we can take \mathbb{N} to be an adequate representation of an appropriate scale for e along that dimension.

If a particular excellence e is not an all-or-nothing matter along a given dimension, and if e partitions possible objects into infinitely many equivalence classes that collectively have the ordinal features of the real numbers, then we can take either the real interval $[0, 1]$ —or $(0, 1]$, or $[0, 1)$, or $(0, 1)$ —or the real interval $[0, \infty)$ —or $(0, \infty)$ —to be an adequate representation of an appropriate scale for e , depending upon whether the scale is bounded or unbounded.

If a particular excellence e has a scale with more than one dimension, then it might be that we need different kinds of representations for these different dimensions. If every excellence has a scale, and if there is a scale for overall excellence, then we can think of the scales for individual excellences as dimensions of the scale for overall excellence.

Knowledgeability might be taken to be a scale with more than one dimension in the following way. Suppose that there are two kinds of propositions: (i) propositions that are *knowable by finite intellect*; and (ii) propositions that are *knowable only by infinite intellect*. Each of these two kinds of propositions might be taken to generate a scale with finite analysis for a dimension of knowledgeability: the percentage of true propositions of the given kind that are known. Finally, the overall scale for knowledgeability might be subject to the following further condition: any non-zero amount of knowledge of propositions knowable only by infinite intellect trumps any amount of knowledge of propositions knowable by finite intellect. (Of course, I make no commitment to the correctness, or even the intelligibility, of this proposed scale for knowledge. I introduce it merely to illustrate what I mean by dimensions of scales, and by finite analysis for a scale.)

4. Absolute Degrees of Excellence

Suppose that overall excellence has a total ordering, i.e. suppose that overall excellence—along with each particular excellence—has a total ordering on a degreed

scale. Then it is at least *prima facie* plausible to suppose that we can describe overall excellence and particular excellences in the following way:

An agent x in a world w at time t relative to domain S possesses excellence e to degree $\mathbf{e}(x, w, S, t)$.

An agent x in world w at time t possesses excellence e to degree $\mathbf{e}(x, w, t) = \int_S \mathbf{e}(x, w, S, t)$, where \int_S is a function that ‘averages’ the excellence of x in w at t over all of the domains that are relevant to the excellence e .

An agent x in world w possesses excellence e to degree $\mathbf{e}(x, w) = \int_t \mathbf{e}(x, w, t)$, where \int_t is a function that ‘averages’ the excellence of x in w over all of the times in w at which x exists in w .

An agent x possesses excellence e to degree $\mathbf{e}(x) = \int_w \mathbf{e}(x, w)$, where \int_w is a function that ‘averages’ the excellence of x in w over all of the worlds in which x exists. (An alternative definition would have it that an agent x has excellence $\mathbf{e}(x) = \int_w \mathbf{e}(x, w)$, where \int_w is a function that ‘averages’ the excellence of x over all worlds, and where $\mathbf{e}(x, w) = 0$ if x does not exist in w . We shall return to consideration of the merits of this alternative definition in Section 9.)

An agent x in world w at time t has overall excellence $\mathbf{E}(x, w, t) = \int_e \mathbf{e}(x, w, t)$, where \int_e is a function that ‘averages’ over the excellences that x has in w at t .

An agent x in world w has overall excellence $\mathbf{E}(x, w) = \int_t \mathbf{E}(x, w, t)$, where \int_t is a function that ‘averages’ the overall excellence of x in w over all of the times in w at which x exists in w .

An agent x has overall excellence $\mathbf{E}(x) = \int_w \mathbf{E}(x, w)$, where \int_w is a function that ‘averages’ the overall excellence of x over all of the worlds in which x exists. (Again, an alternative definition would have it that an agent x has overall excellence $\mathbf{E}(x) = \int_w \mathbf{E}(x, w)$, where \int_w is a function that ‘averages’ the overall excellence of x over all worlds, and where $\mathbf{E}(x, w) = 0$ if x does not exist in w .)

It is not plausible to suppose that $\mathbf{E}(x)$ is non-degreed. Nor is it plausible to suppose that $\mathbf{E}(x)$ is discrete. It is plausible to suppose that the scale for $\mathbf{E}(x)$ has a finite analysis only if there is one possible object that ‘sets the standard’ for each of the particular excellences (hence only if the scale for each of the particular excellences is bounded). It is plausible to suppose that the scale for $\mathbf{E}(x)$ is bounded but lacking a finite analysis only if the space of possibilities satisfies very special conditions. (More on this in Section 9 below.) Hence, if it is not plausible to suppose that there is one possible object that ‘sets the standard’ for each of the particular excellences, and if it is not plausible to suppose that the space of possibilities satisfies very special conditions, then it is plausible to suppose that the scale for $\mathbf{E}(x)$ is unbounded.

5. Comparative Degrees of Excellence

Suppose that overall excellence—along with at least some particular excellences—has a merely partial ordering. Then it is at least *prima facie* plausible that we should begin our investigation with definitions of the following kind:

M (**x**, **S**, **w**, **t**, **y**, **S'**, **w'**, **t'**, **e**) iff x is more excellent on domain S in world w at time t than y is on domain S' in world w' at t' with respect to particular excellence e.

L (**x**, **S**, **w**, **t**, **y**, **S'**, **w'**, **t'**, **e**) iff x is no less excellent on domain S in world w at time t than y is on domain S' in world w' at t' with respect to particular excellence e.

On the assumption that we can somehow 'average out' domain specificity and time-dependence from the defined relations, we will be able to produce defined relations of the following kinds:

M (**x**, **w**, **y'**, **w'**, **e**) iff x is more excellent in world w than y is in world w' with respect to particular excellence e.

L (**x**, **w**, **y**, **w'**, **e**) iff x is no less excellent in world w than y is in world w' with respect to particular excellence e.

On the further assumption that we can somehow 'average out' world-specificity from the defined relations, we will then be able to produce defined relations of the following kinds:

M (**x**, **y**, **e**) iff x is more excellent than y with respect to particular excellence e.

L (**x**, **y**, **e**) iff x is no less excellent than y with respect to particular excellence e.

Finally, on the further assumption that we can somehow 'average out' the relativity to particular excellences, we will be able to produce defined relations of the following kinds:

M (**x**, **w**, **t**, **y**, **w'**, **t'**) iff x is more overall excellent in world w at time t than y is in world w' at t'.

L (**x**, **w**, **t**, **y**, **w'**, **t'**) iff x is no less overall excellent in world w at time t than y is in world w' at t'.

M (**x**, **w**, **y'**, **w'**) iff x is more overall excellent in world w than y is in world w'.

L (**x**, **w**, **y**, **w'**) iff x is no less overall excellent in world w than y is in world w'.

M (**x**, **y**) iff x is more overall excellent than y.

L (**x**, **y**) iff x is no less overall excellent than y.

There is reason to suppose that we can make *some* judgments of the forms **M** (**x**, **S**, **w**, **t**, **y**, **S'**, **w'**, **t'**, **e**) and **L** (**x**, **S**, **w**, **t**, **y**, **S'**, **w'**, **t'**, **e**). In particular, for any excellence e,

if $S' \subseteq S$, and x in w at t *dominates* y in w' at t' (with respect to e on S), then it will be true that $M(x, S, w, t, y, S', w', t', e)$ and $L(x, S, w, t, y, S', w', t', e)$. Moreover, there are some cases in which we clearly can 'average out' relations in the way required: namely, those cases in which there is *point-by-point dominance* of one object over another. Suppose, for example, that, for all S , $M(x, S, w, t, y, S, w', t', e)$ and $L(x, S, w, t, y, S, w', t', e)$. Then, clearly, $M(x, w, t, y, w', t')$ and $L(x, w, t, y, w', t')$. Similarly, if for all t , $M(x, w, t, y, w', t)$ and $L(x, w, t, y, w', t)$, then clearly $M(x, w, y, w')$. And if for all w , $M(x, w, y, w)$ and $L(x, w, y, w)$, then $M(x, y)$ and $L(x, y)$. However, these are clearly special cases that *may not* turn out to be of any particular interest.

6. Perfections and Perfection

Perfections are *ideals* for excellences. Perfections are also the bases for finite analyses in the case of absolutely degreed excellences that have finite analyses. It is not a requirement on perfections that they are possibly instantiated: a perfection can be an ideal for an excellence even if it is an ideal that cannot possibly be realised.

Consider knowledgeability. It might be thought that it is an ideal for knowledgeability that there is nothing that one fails to know: one is perfectly knowledgeable only if one knows 100% of true propositions. Moreover, the idea that perfect knowledgeability requires knowledge of 100% of true propositions is obviously tied to a finite analysis of knowledgeability: the knowledgeability of a given being in a given world at a given time on a given domain is measured by the percentage of true propositions from that domain that the being in question knows at the time in question in the world in question. However, it might also be thought that this is an unrealisable ideal: it might be thought that it is simply impossible for there to be a being that knows 100% of true propositions.

Consider powerfulness. It might be thought that it is an ideal for powerfulness that there is nothing that one is unable to do: one is perfectly powerful only if one can do 100% of tasks that it is possible for at least one agent to do. Moreover, the idea that perfect powerfulness requires the ability to perform 100% of tasks that it is possible for at least one agent to do is obviously tied to a finite analysis of powerfulness: the powerfulness of a given being in a given world at a given time on a given domain is measured by the percentage of tasks that it is possible for at least one agent to perform on the domain in question that the being in question can perform in the world in question at the time in question on the domain. However, it might also be thought that this is an unrealisable ideal: it might be thought that it is simply impossible for there to be a being that is able to perform 100% of tasks that it is possible for at least one being to perform.

And so on. If we suppose that, for every excellence, there is a perfection that is an ideal for that excellence, then we might also suppose that there is a perfection for overall excellence: a perfect being is one that is perfect with respect to every excellence. That is: an ideal for a being is that, for each excellence, that being is perfect with respect to that excellence: perfectly knowledgeable, perfectly powerful, perfectly good, and so forth. Of course, if it is impossible for particular perfections to be realised, then it is impossible for there to be a being that realises perfection; but, even if there is no particular perfection that it is impossible to realise, it may still be

the case that it is impossible for there to be a being that realises perfection. Moreover, our further judgements about the realisability of particular perfections, and of the possibility of a being that exhibits all perfections, depend upon our judgments about the space of possibilities.

7. Near-Perfections and Near-Perfection

Near-perfections are *minimal* departures from perfections, i.e. minimal departures from ideals of excellence. We can illustrate the notion of near-perfection using the same examples that were introduced in the previous section.

Consider knowledgeability. Given that it is an ideal for knowledge that there is nothing that one does not know, a minimal departure from ideal knowledge is a case in which there is just one proposition that one does not know (and, by sympathetic extension, minimal departures from ideal knowledge are cases in which there are just a handful of propositions that one does not know). It is worth noting that, if perfect knowledge is unrealisable, then it may well be the case that near-perfect knowledge is also unrealisable: if there cannot be something that knows 100% of true propositions, then it may also be the case that there cannot be something that fails to know 100% of true propositions because there is just one proposition—or a tiny handful of propositions—that it fails to know.

Consider powerfulness. Given that it is an ideal for powerfulness that one can do anything that it is possible for at least one being to do, a minimal departure from ideal powerfulness is a case in which there is just one thing that it is possible for at least one being to do that one cannot do (and, by sympathetic extension, minimal departures from ideal powerfulness are cases in which there are just a handful of things that it is possible for at least one being to do that one cannot do). Again, it is worth noting that, if perfect powerfulness is unrealisable, then it may well be the case that near-perfect powerfulness is also unrealisable: if there cannot be something that is able to do 100% of the things that it is possible for at least one being to do, then it may also be the case that there cannot be something that fails to be able to do 100% of the things that it is possible for at least one being to do because there is just one thing—or a tiny handful of things—that it is possible for other beings to do that it is unable to do.

And so on. Of course, given the notion of near-perfections, we can also introduce the notion of a near perfect being, i.e. of a being that is perfect in every respect but one, and near-perfect in that remaining respect (or, more generously, of a being that is perfect in all but a handful of respects, and near-perfect in all of those remaining respects). As before, we note that, even if all of the relevant perfections and near-perfections are realisable, it may still be the case that near-perfection is unrealisable.

8. Maximality and Near-Maximality

Maximal excellences are *maximal possible* instantiations of excellences. If an excellence e has a total order, then a possible object x is maximally excellent in respect of e just in case the degree to which x possesses e is not exceeded by the degree to which any other possible object possesses e : $(\forall y) (e(x) \geq e(y))$. If an excellence e has a merely partial order, then a possible object x is maximally excellent

in respect of e just in case there is no possible object y such that y exceeds x in excellence with respect to e : $(\forall y) L(x, y, e)$. Of course, these definitions leave open the possibility that there is exactly one possible being that is maximally excellent in respect of e , and they also leave open the possibility that there is more than one possible being that is maximally excellent in respect of e .

There are corresponding definitions of what it is for a possible being to be maximal with respect to overall excellence E . If overall excellence is totally ordered, then a possible object has maximal overall excellence just in case the degree to which x is overall excellent is not exceeded by the degree to which any other possible object is overall excellent: $(\forall y) (E(x) \geq E(y))$. And if overall excellence is merely partially ordered, then a possible object x has maximal overall excellence just in case there is no possible object y such that y exceeds x in respect of overall excellence: $(\forall y) L(x, y)$. Again, these definitions leave open the possibility that there is exactly one possible being that has maximal overall excellence, and they also leave open the possibility that there is more than one possible being that has maximal overall excellence.

We can illustrate the ways in which maximal excellences may differ from perfections and near-perfections by considering the same examples that were discussed in the previous two sections.

Consider knowledgeability. Suppose that it turns out that it is impossible for any being to know more than 2% of all true propositions. (In Section 11, we shall consider a theory of possibilities that might well vindicate this claim.) If it is impossible for any being to know more than 2% of all true propositions, then it is clear that maximal knowledgeability falls very far short of both perfect knowledgeability and near-perfect knowledgeability.

Consider powerfulness. Suppose that it turns out that it is impossible for any being to perform more than 2% of the tasks that it is possible for at least one being to perform. (Again, in Section 11, we shall consider a theory of possibilities that might be supposed to vindicate this claim.) If it is impossible for any being to perform more than 2% of the tasks that it is possible for at least one being to perform, then it is clear that maximal powerfulness falls very far short of both perfect powerfulness and near-perfect powerfulness.

And so on. If we suppose that, for every excellence, there is a corresponding maximal excellence, then we might suppose that there is also maximal overall excellence. However, if there are some excellences for which there is no corresponding maximal excellence, then it seems plausible to suppose that there is no maximal overall excellence. Of course, even if we suppose that, for every excellence, there is a corresponding maximal excellence, we might still suppose that there is no corresponding maximal excellence (depending on our further judgments about the space of possibilities).

There are at least three different ways in which we might deny that there is a maximal excellence that corresponds to a given excellence. Suppose, first, that an excellence e has a total order. On the one hand, it might be that the scale for e is unbounded. In that case, there is no upper limit to possibly instantiated degrees of e . On the other hand, it might be that the scale for e is bounded, but that the uppermost value on the scale is

not possibly instantiated. In that case, while there is an upper limit to possibly instantiated degrees of e , there is no possible object that instantiates that upper limit. (This case is only possible if our scale is dense or continuous.) Suppose, second, that an excellence e has a merely partial order. In that case, it might be that, for any possible object x , there is a possible object y such that $M(y, x, e)$, i.e. such that y exceeds or surpasses x in respect of e . (Of course, this condition is also satisfied in each of the cases in which a totally ordered excellence fails to have a corresponding maximal excellence.)

9. Existence, Necessity and Essence

Among the controversial features of the discussion to this point, one obvious point of possible contention lies in the way that we have treated modal considerations. The assumption that one can evaluate the excellence of possible objects by summing over the excellence of those objects in possible worlds is clearly controversial. There may be *something* to the intuition that excellence is—or ought to be—independent of the vagaries of history: but, at the very least, it is not obvious that we should erect our account of excellence on this foundation. Moreover, even if it is true that our ‘alternative’ account—viz. that an agent x has excellence $\mathbf{E}(x) = \int_w E(x, w)$, where \int_w is a function that ‘averages’ the excellence of x over all worlds, and where $E(x, w) = 0$ if x does not exist in w —gives results that agree with the intuitions of those who suppose that necessary existence is an excellence, and that essential excellence has more value than non-essential excellence, it might nonetheless be thought that we should take relative excellence in worlds as primitive, and then work explicitly with modal operators (or with equivalent quantification over possible worlds).

A first thought is that a being is *maximally excellent in the actual world* just in case that being exists in the actual world and satisfies the following two conditions: first, it is no less excellent than any other being in the actual world; and second, it is not less excellent than any being in any other possible world. That is:

G is maximally excellent in the actual world iff (i) $(\forall y) L(G, \alpha, y, \alpha)$ and (ii) $(\forall w) (\forall y \in w) L(G, \alpha, w, y)$. (The first condition is redundant given the second condition; I include it to enable straightforward comparison with the following claim.)

G is *uniquely* maximally excellent in the actual world iff (i) $(\forall y \neq G) M(G, \alpha, y, \alpha)$ and (ii) $(\forall w) (\forall y \in w) L(G, \alpha, w, y)$.

A second thought is that a being is *resiliently maximally excellent in the actual world* just in case that being exists in all worlds that are sufficiently close to the actual world and satisfies the following two conditions: first, in each world that is sufficiently close to the actual world, the being is no less excellent than any other being in that world; and second, the being is not less excellent than any being in any other possible world. That is:

G is resiliently maximally excellent in the actual world iff (i) $(\forall w: w \text{ is sufficiently near to } \alpha) (\forall y \in w) L(G, w, y, w)$; and (ii) $(\forall w) (\forall y \in w) L(G, \alpha, w, y)$. (Perhaps one might also want to insist that condition (ii) holds in all worlds sufficiently close to the

actual world: (ii)' $(\forall w': w' \text{ is sufficiently close to the actual world}) (\forall w) (\forall y \in w) L (G, w', w, y)$.

G is *uniquely* resiliently maximally excellent in the actual world iff (i) $(\forall w: w \text{ is sufficiently near to } \alpha) (\forall y \neq G \in w) L (G, w, y, w)$; and (ii) $(\forall w) (\forall y \in w) L (G, \alpha, w, y)$. (Here, one might want to weaken condition (i) to allow that G is uniquely maximally excellent in the actual world, and perhaps only no less than maximally excellent in some sufficiently nearby worlds; and one might want to insist that condition (ii) holds in all worlds sufficiently close to the actual world. Since these two variations are independent, that gives four alternatives to the formulated principle.)

A third thought is that a being is *necessarily maximally excellent (in the actual world and in all possible worlds)* just in case that being exists in all possible worlds and in each of those possible worlds is at least as excellent as all possible beings in all possible worlds. That is:

G is necessarily maximally excellent iff $(\forall w) (\forall w') (\forall y \in w') L (G, w, y, w')$.

G is *uniquely* necessarily maximally excellent iff $(\forall w) (\forall w') (\forall y \neq G \in w') M (G, w, y, w')$.

Of course, there are corresponding definitions for particular excellences—as against overall excellence—that I do not need to set out explicitly here.

10. Theories of Possibility

As noted in Oppy (2006:153f.), there is great diversity in philosophical views about the metaphysics and epistemology of modality. Some philosophers repudiate all talk about necessity, possibility, essence, and the like; other philosophers repudiate all *de re* modal talk about necessity, possibility, essence, and the like. Among those philosophers who do not repudiate all modal talk (or all *de re* modal talk), some hold that modal talk is merely of instrumental value: it does not serve to limn the structure of reality. Those who take *eliminativist* (error-theoretic) or *instrumentalist* (non-cognitivist) approaches to modal talk will not look favourably on the analyses presented in earlier sections of this paper.

Among philosophers who do not accept eliminativist or instrumentalist approaches to modal talk, there is considerable diversity of opinion concerning the truth-makers for modal talk. Some endorse *primitivist* accounts according to which there are no truth-makers for modal claims. Some endorse *conceptualist* accounts according to which the truth-makers for modal claims are mental states of actual human agents, or mental states of other actually existing agents. Some endorse *realist* accounts, according to which the truth-makers for modal claims are a particular domain of entities: concrete possible worlds, or ersatz possible worlds, or the like. We take no stance on this divided opinion here: however, we allow ourselves to talk as the realists do.

Some philosophers suppose that there are different kinds of possibilities—logical possibilities, conceptual possibilities, metaphysical possibilities, physical possibilities, epistemic possibilities, doxastic possibilities, and so forth—that are realised in different kinds of possible worlds—logically possible worlds, conceptually possible

worlds, metaphysically possible worlds, physically possible worlds, epistemically possible worlds, doxastically possible worlds, and so on. Other philosophers suppose that, to the extent that these really are different kinds of possibilities, they are all realised in the same kinds of possible worlds (though perhaps only in restricted parts of the total domain of possible worlds). On this kind of view, there are inclusion relations that hold between kinds of possible worlds: for instance, all physically possible worlds are metaphysically possible worlds; all metaphysically possible worlds are conceptually possible worlds; and so forth. Yet other philosophers deny at least some of the alleged distinctions between different kinds of possibilities: some hold that ‘epistemic possibilities’ and ‘doxastic possibilities’ are not really kinds of possibilities; other hold there is no distinction between, say, metaphysical possibility and physical possibility. Again, I take no stance on this divided opinion here: however, I do allow myself to proceed with talk about ‘metaphysical’ possibility.

In the next section, we shall examine the implications of *one* particular theory of possibility for the preceding account of maximal beings. While I think that this theory is an attractive account of metaphysical possibility, I have no interest in urging its attractions here. Rather, the point is just to show what *might* be entailed by the account of maximal beings when that account is embedded in a particular theory of possibility.

11. Worked Example

Here is the promised theory of (metaphysical) possibility:

- (1) All possible worlds share a common history with the actual world, and diverge from it only as the result of a different outcome for an objectively chancy event
- (2) Our world has always been a purely natural world: there have been no spooks, no gods, etc., at any point in its history.
- (3) Nothing supernatural arises in hitherto purely natural worlds.
- (4) Physical laws and basic physical structures do not vary over history.

Given (i)-(iv), contemporary physics makes it very plausible to think that maximally knowledgeable beings are very far from perfectly knowledgeable beings, and very far from near-perfectly knowledgeable beings; and that maximally powerful beings are very far from perfectly powerful beings, and very far from near-perfectly powerful beings. For, given (i)-(iv), contemporary physics makes it very plausible to suppose that no possible being can have knowledge of more than its relatively immediate physical surroundings—since no possible being can have knowledge of particular physical conditions outside of its backward light cone—and that no possible being can act on anything more than its relatively immediate physical surroundings—since no possible being can act in physical arenas that lie outside of its forward light cone. And, moreover, given (i)-(iv), contemporary physics makes it very plausible to suppose that most of the physical world lies outside of both the forward and backward light-cones of *any* possible being.

It is perhaps worth noting that we can probably get the same kinds of results even if we relax the final condition in our theory of possibility: even if we countenance worlds with different values for physical constants and boundary conditions, and worlds in which there are (not too) different physical laws, it will still be the case that

even maximally knowledgeable beings are very far from perfectly knowledgeable beings, and very far from near-perfectly knowledgeable beings; and that even maximally powerful beings are very far from perfectly powerful beings, and very far from near-perfectly powerful beings. The theory of metaphysical possibility sketched above is not the only theory of metaphysical possibility that will deliver the consequences that I have noted.

Perhaps it is also worth noting that at least some of the claims that I have made in this section have not gone uncontested. In particular, Tipler (1994) claims that, even if our world consists of no more than the physical universe as described by current physical theory, it may still be the case that there is a maximally knowledgeable being that knows 100% of the propositions that are true of the physical universe. I think that Tipler's views are extremely far-fetched; in any case, I don't propose to consider them further here. (I provide further discussion of Tipler's views in Oppy (1998) and Oppy (2000).)

12. Anselmian Theism

Anselmian Theism is typically said to be characterised by the claim that there is a unique being than which no greater can be conceived, or by the claim that there is a unique being than which no greater can be thought.

In the light of the foregoing discussion, we can see that there are at least two importantly different ways in which what is said to be the characteristic claim of Anselmian Theism can be interpreted. On the one hand, the allegedly characteristic claim of Anselmian Theism might be the claim that there is a unique *perfect* being: a being that is perfect with respect to every excellence. On the other hand, the allegedly characteristic claim of Anselmian Theism might be the claim that there is a unique *maximal* being: a being that is maximal with respect to every excellence. And, of course, even if they are less plausible as interpretations of what is said to be the characteristic claim of Anselmian Theism there are also many intermediate interpretations that might also be considered, e.g. the claim that there is a unique *nearly perfect* being.

Whether one thinks that any importance attaches to this distinction between two different ways in which what is said to be the characteristic claim of Anselmian Theism can be interpreted *might* be thought to depend upon whether or not one supposes that Anselmian Theism is true. If Anselmian Theism is true, then, we might suppose, there is a single being that is both perfect with respect to every excellence and maximal with respect to every excellence. For, on the one hand, if Anselmian Theism is true, then God's excellence in respect *e* just is the standard (or ideal) against which the excellence in respect *e* of every other possible being is measured. And, on the other hand, if Anselmian Theism is true, then God's excellence in respect *e* is the maximum possible excellence in respect *e*. That is, we might suppose, if Anselmian Theism is true, then God is both a perfect being and a maximally excellent being. However, if Anselmian Theism is false, then, we might suppose, even if there is a being that is uniquely maximally excellent, there is surely no single being that is perfect with respect to every excellence. In particular, if Anselmian Theism is false, then at least some of the diverse ideals for different excellences are surely impossible to instantiate.

The argument of the previous paragraph may appear tempting; but I doubt that it is correct. In particular, if we suppose that Anselmian Theism implies some kind of commitment to the success of Anselmian ontological arguments, then it seems to me that proponents of Anselmian Theism are required to think about how Anselmian ontological arguments fare under the various possible disambiguations of the key phrase that figures in those arguments. If we suppose that commitment to the success of Anselmian ontological arguments implies commitment to the idea that those not already committed to Anselmian Theism ought to be persuaded of the truth of Anselmian Theism by those arguments, then it is clear that those arguments cannot rest on the assumption that a perfect being is a maximally excellent being *if* that assumption in turn must be founded in the assumption of the truth of Anselmian Theism. On the other hand, if we suppose that commitment to the success of Anselmian ontological arguments implies commitment to the idea that ontological arguments somehow display adequate epistemic or doxastic foundations for Anselmian Theism, then, again, it is clear that those arguments cannot rest on the assumption that a perfect being is a maximally excellent being *if* that assumption in turn must be founded in the assumption of the truth of Anselmian Theism.

In the next three sections of this paper, we will ask how Anselmian Theism fares under each of three possible disambiguations of what is typically said to be the characteristic claim of Anselmian Theism.

13. A Perfect Being?

Suppose that we take Anselmian Theism to be grounded in the claim that there is a perfect being, i.e. a being that is perfect with respect to every excellence. What reasons might one have for refusing to accept this claim, i.e. what reasons might one have for refusing to believe that there is such a perfect being?

1. One might reject the Excellence Assumption. That is, one might be a non-cognitivist or an error-theorist about at least some excellences; or might one deny that there is a property of overall excellence; or one might deny that the overall excellence of a thing is determined by its particular excellences.
2. One might reject the claim that all excellences have finite analyses, or the claim that overall excellence has a finite analysis. In other words, one might reject the claim that, for each excellence, there is an 'external' standard against which the excellence of particular objects is measured; or one might reject the claim that, for overall excellence, there is an 'external' standard against which the overall excellence of particular objects is measured.
3. One might suppose that it is highly likely that the scales for some excellences are unbounded, or that scale for overall excellence is unbounded. Further, one might suppose that it is highly likely that the scales for some excellences, while bounded by an ideal, are such that it is impossible for the bound to be instantiated, even though it is possible for the bound to be arbitrarily closely approached. And one might suppose that it is highly likely that the scales from some excellences, while bounded, are not bounded by ideals (and this whether or not it is possible for those bounds to be instantiated).

4. One might hold a theory of possibility according to which it is simply *impossible* for at least some excellences to be perfectly instantiated; or one might hold a theory of possibility according to which it is simply impossible for at least some excellences to be jointly perfectly instantiated; or one might hold a theory of possibility according to which it is simply impossible for at least some excellences to be jointly perfectly instantiated given that certain other facts obtain. Such a theory of possibility might not need to be very demanding: there are well-known worries about the possibility of beings with knowledge of 100% of true propositions; and there are well-known worries about the possibility of beings with power to perform 100% of tasks that it is possible for at least one being to perform that also are incapable of performing tasks that are less than 100% good; and there are well-known worries about the possibility of beings with knowledge of 100% of true propositions, and power to perform 100% of tasks that it is possible for at least one being to perform, and inability to perform actions that are less than 100% good existing in worlds that exhibit the degrees and kinds of evils that are to be found in the actual world. However, *given* sufficiently demanding theories of possibility, it is clear that these worries will not be controversial.

Given this sample of possible objections to the perfect being interpretation of Anselmian Theism, it is clear that there are formidable barriers to the idea that there are *persuasive* Anselmian ontological arguments; and it also seems plausible to suggest that there are formidable objections to the idea that there are good *a priori* grounds for acceptance of the claim that there is instantiation of the characteristic formula of Anselmian Theism.

14. A Nearly Perfect Being?

Suppose that we take Anselmian Theism to be grounded in the claim that there is a nearly perfect being, i.e. a being that is at least nearly perfect with respect to every excellence. What reasons might one have for refusing to accept this claim, i.e. what reasons might one have for refusing to believe that there is such a nearly perfect being?

1. One might reject the Excellence Assumption. That is, one might be a non-cognitivist or an error-theorist about excellences; or might one deny that there is a property of overall excellence; or one might deny that the overall excellence of a thing is determined by its particular excellences.
2. One might reject the claim that all excellences have finite analyses, or the claim that overall excellence has a finite analysis. In other words, one might reject the claim that, for each excellence, there is an external standard against which the excellence of particular objects is measured; or one might reject the claim that, for overall excellence, there is an external standard against which the overall excellence of particular objects is measured.
3. One might suppose that it is highly likely that the scales for some excellences are unbounded, or that scale for overall excellence is unbounded. Further, one might suppose that it is highly likely that the scales from some excellences, while bounded, are not bounded by near-ideals (and this whether or not it is possible for those bounds to be instantiated).

4. One might hold a theory of possibility according to which it is simply *impossible* for at least some excellences to be near-perfectly instantiated; or one might hold a theory of possibility according to which it is simply impossible for at least some excellences to be jointly near-perfectly instantiated; or one might hold a theory of possibility according to which it is simply impossible for at least some excellences to be jointly near-perfectly instantiated given that certain other facts obtain. Such a theory of possibility might not need to be very demanding: there are well-known worries about the possibility of beings with knowledge of near to 100% of true propositions; and there are well-known worries about the possibility of beings with power to perform near to 100% of tasks that it is possible for at least one being to perform that also are incapable of performing tasks that are less than near to 100% good; and there are well-known worries about the possibility of beings with knowledge of near to 100% of true propositions, and power to perform near to 100% of tasks that it is possible for at least one being to perform, and inability to perform actions that are less than near to 100% good existing in worlds that exhibit the degrees and kinds of evils that are to be found in the actual world.

5. One might suppose that there are other, less familiar, reasons for holding that it is simply impossible for some excellences to be near-perfectly instantiated. Consider knowledgeability. Suppose that the ideal for knowledgeability is knowledge of 100% of true propositions, but that this ideal is not possibly instantiated. Suppose further that near-perfect knowledgeability consists of knowledge of all but one true proposition, say *p*. Then there is a straightforward argument that it is impossible for anything to be near-perfectly knowledgeable. For suppose that *r* is a true proposition distinct from *p*. If a subject does not know *p*, then that subject does not know the conjunction (*p*&*r*). Whence it is plainly impossible for a being to lack knowledge of just one proposition, or of just a few propositions. (How can we describe a smallest departure from perfect knowledgeability that is not defeated by this objection? I think as follows. Suppose that {*p_i*} is a set of logically independent propositions whose closure under entailment contains all and only the true propositions. Choose one of the *p_i*'s, and consider the closure under entailment of what is left when that proposition is omitted from the starting set. If you think that there are items of knowledge that are not logically related, but that stand or fall together, then you'll think that it may be necessary to throw out more of the logically independent propositions that belong to the starting set.)

Given this sample of objections to the near-perfect being interpretation of Anselmian Theism, it seems quite plausible to claim that this interpretation fares even worse than the perfect being interpretation of Anselmian Theism on all counts. On the one hand, it is hard to see that the near-perfect being interpretation of Anselmian Theism avoids any of the *major* objections to the perfect being interpretation of Anselmian Theism; and on the other hand, there are *serious* objections to the near-perfect being interpretation of Anselmian Theism that are not objections to the perfect being interpretation of Anselmian Theism.

15. A Maximal Being?

Suppose that we take Anselmian Theism to be grounded in the claim that there is a maximally overall excellent being, i.e. a being that is maximal with respect to overall

excellence. What reasons might one have for refusing to accept this claim, i.e. what reasons might one have for refusing to believe that there is such a maximally overall excellent being?

1. One might reject the Excellence Assumption. That is, one might be a non-cognitivist or an error-theorist about excellences; or might one deny that there is a property of overall excellence; or one might deny that the overall excellence of a thing is determined by its particular excellences.
2. One might suppose that overall excellence is unbounded: that is, one might suppose that, for any possible being *x*, there is a possible being *y* which exceeds or surpasses *x* in respect of overall excellence. Or one might suppose that, while overall excellence is bounded, the bound is not possibly attainable, even though it can be arbitrarily closely approached. (Or one might suppose that it is simply inscrutable whether it is likely that the bound is possibly attainable. Etc.)
3. One might suppose that it is likely that, if there is one possible being whose overall excellence is not exceeded by any other possible being, then there are many possible beings whose overall excellence is not exceeded by any other possible being. (This might be because there are very few possible comparisons of overall excellence between possible beings, i.e. because most pairs of possible beings cannot be ranked for overall excellence. Or it might be because of the details of one's favoured conception of possibility.)

Given this sample of objections to the maximal being interpretation of Anselmian Theism, it is clear that there are formidable barriers to the idea that there are *persuasive* Anselmian ontological arguments; and it also seems plausible to suggest that there are formidable objections to the idea that there are good *a priori* grounds for acceptance of the claim that there is instantiation of the characteristic formula of Anselmian Theism. However, it is also worth observing that Anselmian Theists have *other* reasons to be dissatisfied with this interpretation. In particular, there is no *a priori* guarantee that a maximally excellent being will be worshipworthy, or divine, or even properly described as a 'god'. As we saw in Section 11, depending upon the details of one's account of possibility, it may turn out that a maximally overall excellent being is *very, very far* from being a perfect being or a near-perfect being. While there is perhaps some initial plausibility to the claim that a perfect being or a near-perfect being is worshipworthy, or divine, or properly described as a 'god', it is very hard to see that any plausibility attaches to the claim that a maximally overall excellent being is worshipworthy, or divine, or properly described as a 'god' (unless, perhaps, that maximally overall excellent being is *sufficiently close* to being perfect or near-perfect).

16. Lessons

Recall the characterisation of Anselmian Theism with which we began. According to Anselmian Theism: (a) there is a being than which none greater can be conceived; and (b) it is knowable on purely—solely, entirely—*a priori* grounds that there is a being than which none greater can be conceived. If we suppose that a being than which none greater can be conceived is a perfectly or ideally excellent being, then we see that it is *very implausible* to suppose that we know that there is such a being on purely *a priori*

grounds. In particular, it seems quite implausible to suppose that much of our knowledge of metaphysical possibility is purely *a priori*. Moreover, it seems highly plausible to maintain that there are theories of metaphysical possibility that cannot be ruled out on purely *a priori* grounds, but which rule out the possibility that there is a perfectly or ideally excellent being. On the other hand, if we suppose that a being than which none greater can be conceived is a maximally excellent being, then we see that it is *very* implausible to suppose that we know that there is such a being on purely *a priori* grounds, at least given the further requirement that we know *a priori* that the being in question is worthy of worship, divine, and properly characterised as a ‘god’. For, once again, it seems quite implausible to suppose that much of our knowledge of metaphysical possibility is purely *a priori*. And, moreover, it seems highly plausible to maintain that there are theories of metaphysical possibility that cannot be ruled out on purely *a priori* grounds, but which do not allow the possibility that there is a maximally excellent being that is worthy of worship, divine, and properly characterised as a ‘god’. Furthermore—for the same kinds of reasons—even if we drop the further requirement that we know *a priori* that the being in question is worthy of worship, divine, and properly characterised as a ‘god’, it seems highly plausible to maintain that it is at best *a priori* inscrutable whether there is a maximally excellent being.

Given the above conclusions, it also seems reasonable to suggest that Anselmian Theism gains traction by conflating notions that ought to be distinguished: if we slide backwards and forwards between the claim that there is a perfectly excellent being and the claim that there is a maximally excellent being, then we may fail to notice the cracks that open up when we are careful in marking the distinctions that these claims require.

Finally, given the foregoing discussion, it might seem reasonable to suggest that Anselmian Theism is not adequately captured by the standard formula, no matter how that standard formula is interpreted. Suppose that we *stipulate* that a ‘god’ is a divine supernatural being that creates universes *ex nihilo*. Then it might perhaps be thought that a more plausible starting formula for Anselmian theism is like this: *a maximally excellent god*. Given this formulation of the characteristic claim of Anselmian Theism, then we would not need to worry that a being characterised by the formula is not divine, or supernatural, or properly described as a ‘god’. (We might still face the worry that some will say that a being characterised by the formula is not worthy of worship. But some—e.g. Sobel (2004:24)—have suggested that even a perfect being might not be worthy of worship. Perhaps we can be excused from worrying about this further point.) However, if we suppose that the characteristic formula is ‘a maximally excellent god’—with the interpretation of ‘god’ that we have introduced—then it surely clear that we do not have good purely *a priori* grounds for claiming that there is a being that satisfies that formula. Given that it is part of Anselmian Theism that it is knowable on purely *a priori* grounds that there is at least one—or perhaps even exactly one—being that satisfies the characteristic formula of Anselmian Theism, it seems that it is not open to Anselmian Theists to modify the characterising formula in the proposed fashion. (We might appeal to the authority of theists such as Aquinas on this final point: we do not know on purely *a priori* grounds that the universe was created *ex nihilo* by a maximally excellent being; at best, we know this—if we know it at all—only on scriptural grounds.)

Appendix: Comments on Nagasawa's 'New Defence' of Anselmian Theism

Nagasawa (2008) offers a 'new defence' of Anselmian Theism. In outline, his defence runs as follows: All—or, at any rate, almost all—existing objections to Anselmian Theism suppose that Anselmian Theism is grounded in the claim that there is a perfect being. Consequently, Anselmian Theism can be defended against all—or, at any rate, almost all—existing objections if it is supposed, instead, that Anselmian Theism *might* be grounded in the claim that there is a near-perfect being or in the claim that there is a maximally excellent being.

My outline of Nagasawa's argument involves what I take to be some sympathetic interpretation. Nagasawa actually claims that all—or, at any rate, almost all—existing objections to Anselmian Theism are grounded in the claim that there is a 'maximally knowledgeable, maximally powerful and maximally benevolent being' (577); and his alternative proposal is that Anselmian Theism might be grounded in the claim that there is a being 'that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power, and benevolence' (586). However, when he presents the 'epistemically possible scenarios' that are supposed to ground the suggestion that Anselmian Theism might be grounded in the latter claim (587-91), those 'scenarios' involve minimal departures from a *perfectly* knowledgeable, *perfectly* powerful and *perfectly* benevolent being.

Given the distinctions drawn in my paper, I think that it is most charitable to interpret his argument as I have done above. However, even if the argument is interpreted in this way, it should be clear why I think that it is open to serious objection. Even if we suppose that Anselmian Theism is taken to be the view that (a) there is a being that falls somewhere between perfect excellence and maximal excellence; and (b) it is knowable on purely *a priori* grounds that there is a being that falls somewhere between perfect excellence and maximal excellence, the considerations advanced in the earlier sections of this paper suggest that there are good *a priori* reasons to reject (b), and that there are not good *a priori* reasons to accept (a).

While the foregoing considerations are, I think, sufficient to cast serious doubt on the conclusions for which Nagasawa argues, there are some further critical points that are also perhaps worth noting.

First, it isn't true that all—or even nearly all—existing objections to Anselmian Theism depend upon the assumption that Anselmian Theism is grounded in the claim that there is a perfect being. A quick scan of sections 13-15 of the present paper shows that many of the same objections apply to Anselmian Theism however we choose to interpret the key characteristic claim. Moreover, these are not novel objections: rather, the objections listed in sections 13-15 of the present paper all fall among the standard objections that are lodged against Anselmian Theism.

Second, as some of the discussion in earlier parts of my paper suggests, one might reasonably worry that the force that Nagasawa attributes to consideration of 'epistemically possible scenarios' can be turned against Anselmian Theism. If we suppose that considerations of 'epistemically possible scenarios' involving near-perfect beings can provide good *a priori* grounds for adopting an interpretation of the characteristic formula that is undecided between the perfect being interpretation and the maximal being interpretation, then we should surely allow that considerations of

‘epistemically possible scenarios’—such as the scenario for logical space outlined in section 11—provides good *a priori* grounds for holding that we should be undecided between various ‘epistemically possible’ conceptions of metaphysical possibility. But, if we should be *a priori* undecided between ‘epistemically possible’ conceptions of metaphysical possibility, then it is quite clear that there are no good *a priori* grounds for espousing Anselmian Theism. But, if that’s right, then Nagasawa’s attempt to salvage Anselmian Theism sends it to the bottom of the harbour.

Third, given Nagasawa’s suggestion that Anselmian Theists are committed to the success of Anselmian ontological arguments—see his discussion of Objection 3 at p.593f.—it is worth noting that our discussion suggests a novel response to that argument on the part of the Fool. When the Anselmian says that the Fool understands the expression ‘being than which none greater can be conceived’, the Fool should insist that he only understands that expression if it is disambiguated. On the one hand, if the expression is taken to mean ‘perfectly excellent being’, then the Fool acknowledges that a being than which none greater can be conceived ‘exists in his understanding’, but insists that the idea of a perfectly excellent being is (almost certainly) an unrealisable idealisation. On the other hand, if the expression is taken to mean ‘maximally excellent being’, then the Fool says that it is at best inscrutable whether a being than which none greater can be conceived ‘exists in the understanding’, since it is at best inscrutable—at least by the lights of the Fool—whether there is such a being; and, moreover, the Fool also adds that, if there is such a being, then it is (almost certainly) not a being that is worthy of worship, divine, and deserving of the appellation ‘god’.

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